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U.19 Long Civil Rights Movement: Breaking New Ground

Interview U-0653

Juliet Wilson and Thomasene Mason

28 July 2011

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ABSTRACT – JULIET WILSON AND THOMASENE MASON

Interviewees: Juliet Wilson and Thomasene Mason

Interviewer: Catherine A. Conner

Interview Date: July 28, 2011

Location: Living room of Wilson's home in Timmons ville, SC

Length: 89:59

This double-interview reveals how John Wilson, father to Juliet Wilson and Thomasene Mason, became one of the biggest black farmers in Florence County. It also shows how he moved his family into the middle class. The two women were part of large family, with twelve children, who were devout members of the Assembly of God. Both women spoke primarily about their father and were eager to share their personal histories. Topics include: renting farmland by blacks from whites; buying farmland from whites; financial credit for farming; farming practices, including crop rotation and mechanization; produce and commodities farming; truck farming; contracting with A&P Supermarket, a national grocery store chain, and other local stores; selling land owned by African Americans after 1965; gardening for family sustenance; use of pond on property for irrigation, fishing, swimming, and baptisms; county extension programs; the Second Great Migration; race relations; terror tactics of the Ku Klux Klan; public high schools for rural African Americans; memories of segregation; voting; higher education; military service; and religion, particularly the Assembly of God.

FIELD NOTES – JULIET WILSON AND THOMASENE MASON

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The Interviewees: Juliet Wilson and Thomasene (née Wilson) Mason are sisters, and their father John Wilson was one of the biggest black farmers in Florence County. At one point, Mr. Wilson owned about 400-420 acres of land. Mrs. Mason, the fourth of twelve children, born in 1925, graduated from South Carolina State University in 1948 and began a career as an elementary school teacher. After marrying, she moved to Norfolk, Virginia. She retired in 1988. Ms. Wilson, the youngest child, born July 27, 1942, never married. She attended Bennett College and Allen University, and earned a B.S. in biology. She became a school teacher, an occupation she had for 30 years. She currently volunteers through her church, the First Assembly of God, on overseas mission trips. Both women are distant cousins of Curtis Harrison, another interviewee for the Breaking New Ground project.

The Interviewer: Catherine A. Conner was a research associate for the oral history project, Breaking New Ground, and is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She worked on the project from May to August 2011.

Description of the Interview: Juliet Wilson agreed to an interview over the telephone. When Conner arrived, Wilson, her sister Thomasene Mason, and her niece were gathered around an island in the kitchen talking. Her niece lives next door. Ms. Wilson is active and vibrant, and Ms. Mason, the older of the two, is still sharp for her 86 years. Ms. Wilson ushered Conner to her living room, which was connected to her dining room. Ms. Wilson had adorned both rooms with figurines from overseas travels, old china dishes, and other family heirlooms; the dining room table was fully dressed with gold and silver plates. Ms. Wilson explained to her sister why Conner was there, and both immediately began to talk about their families before the recorder had been turned on. Conner then explained the purpose of the interview and the archival process for it, and both women agreed to be interviewed without restrictions.

Both sisters revere their father, John Wilson. He originally owned a small farm, about three acres, in Cartersville, SC, about five miles from Timmons ville. He also rented farmland from white farmers, and he managed to save money to buy a larger farm. Around 1938, he bought about 60 acres off of S.C. Highway 403 in Timmons ville from Alston Lane (a distant relative by marriage of Conner). Mr. Wilson later bought another 360 acres from Ray Smith, a local Ford dealer, in the mid 1950s. In 1955, Mr. Wilson built the house that Juliet still lives in. There were twelve children, five males and seven females, and ten went to college. All the sons went into military service. The children worked on the farm when not in school, and Mr. Wilson hired field hands (mostly African Americans) to work his farm. The two biggest sources of income for Mr. Wilson were truck farming (selling directly to the public) and contracting with A&P Supermarket chain. Ms. Wilson said that her father was the largest grower of watermelons around the area. He also farmed tobacco and cotton, and sold pecans from his 100-acre orchard.

He was president of the local NAACP in 1948-1949, but his leadership position sparked retaliation among members of the Ku Klux Klan who burned a cross in his fields. As the sisters remembered, Mr. Wilson was widely respected among whites and blacks. Ms. Wilson believed two processes led her father to retire from farming in the mid 1960s. A&P practices with purchasing affected her father's ability to sell his produce, and the migration of his children and other African Americans from the local area left him without a source of labor. Mr. Wilson died in a car accident in 1967. As of 2011, only two acres remain in the Wilson family.

Both sisters also discussed their lives, education, family, and church life. Neither know much about their maternal family, who were based in North Carolina. After a year or two out of college, Ms. Wilson returned home to Timmonsville when her mother passed away. (Mrs. Wilson died from a heart attack in 1965.) Ms. Wilson related most of the family history, but she often consulted with Thomasene on the accuracy of the information provided. The interview lasted almost an hour and a half, with a few phone calls interrupting the interview with Ms. Wilson. During these times, Conner and Mrs. Mason talked. After the interview ended, both sisters took Conner by the hands and prayed for her safe travels and work on the project.